

Letters of Recommendation – Guide for Recommenders

1. Be sure you want to recommend this student.
 - Discuss a student's academic plans and preparation before agreeing to write a recommendation.
 - Feel free to decline if you cannot give a strong recommendation or if the student gives you short notice.
2. Get enough data to do your job, so ask students for the following:
 - A preliminary list of the graduate programs they are considering, and how they differentiate them.
 - A printout of their transcripts.
 - Copies of two or three graded work projects, theses/papers/labs/write-ups that represent the quality of their work.
 - A rough draft or outline of their personal statement or statement of purpose.
 - A resume, including internships, student activities, volunteer, and service experiences, etc.
 - A brief list of what they think would be most important for a graduate/professional program to know about them.
 - Clear instructions for submitting the letter. Get web links and codes in advance, and stamps (correct postage) for anything that is mailed.
 - A very clear indications of when you need to submit the letter(s).
3. Assemble a laundry list of the student's basic skills; assume nothing. For example: "_____has command of coherent wave optics, Fourier optics, laser physics, lens design, optical metrology, optics of thin films, paraxial optics, physical optics, and all related areas of physics."
4. Describe a particularly successful project or effort the student has made.
 - The candidate needs to stand out, so find one or more "above and beyond" stories to focus on.
 - Mention student experience as proctor, TA, RA, tutor, other forms of departmental service.
5. Get personal when appropriate.
 - Has the student overcome adversity - work, first generation, health or family, special challenges? You can be the candidate's advocate on these issues.
 - Do you enjoy having this student in your classes?
6. Close by predicting success, for example:
 - "One of the top students I've worked with in recent years."
 - "Razor-sharp mind with tremendous potential."
 - "I am confident that_____will be an outstanding graduate student and go on to make major contributions in the field through both research and teaching."
7. Note when the student is going to apply, *not* the deadline.

This is a modified version of a document provided by and used with the permission of Donald Asher (Author of Graduate Admissions Essays) from a faculty example. The original handout was not copyrighted.